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Late to the Party: The Upper Peninsula in the 1932 and 1936 Elections

by Daniel Homernik

Although the 1932 election in the United States would become famous among political scientists and historians for its dynamic nature and effect on U. S. history, the national realignment effected in 1932 did not occur throughout the Upper Peninsula of Michigan until 1936.

The 1932 national election was known as a realignment election, where political loyalties across the country changed very rapidly and a new political landscape was born.

For a realignment election to take place, a number of things usually have to occur: (1) A social or economic crisis occurs; (2) The crisis intensifies political debate and politicizes society; (3) It manifests itself in sudden, massive and permanent shifts in the bases of the political parties; and (4) The election produces very high voter turnout as well as high turnover within parties and elected bodies.¹ These criteria matched the national scene in 1932, when the Great Depression deepened and Prohibition fell out of favor. With these issues, voter turnout in 1932 broke all previous records, with some turnout rates as high as 90 percent. The 1932 election made sweeping changes to the U. S. political landscape still felt today. New England and other northern states, including Michigan, formerly Republican, suddenly became Democratic strongholds, and the Democratic Party returned to power for the first time in decades.

However, in the Upper Peninsula, which had always been strongly Republican—Marquette County in particular—the crisis did not bring about a major political change. In fact, the 1932 election was much the same as past elections in that almost all the Democratic candidates were soundly defeated. Changes in Marquette County did not occur until after Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected and his policies—especially the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—began to affect people locally. This new political reality would become apparent in 1936, when only one Republican in the county was elected, thus shocking the state GOP leadership.

In essence, while the rest of the nation was going through its realignment election in 1932, Marquette County stayed loyal to Republicans and did not shift to the Democratic Party until 1936.

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To understand the political climate of the early 1930s, one must first understand the most important forces of the time. The Great Depression was certainly the first and most important issue on every voter's mind on November 8, 1932.

On “Black Tuesday,” October 31, 1929, after weeks of increasing instability, the New York Stock Exchange crashed. Sixteen million stocks were traded over that dark day, and the industrial index dropped 43 points—almost 10 percent—essentially wiping out all the gains of the previous boom years and making many companies' stock worthless.² After the market crashed, a new and more serious problem emerged: Thousands of banks across the country began closing their doors due to a fatal flaw in the debt and credit structure of the U. S. economy, which during the 1920s had roared

through rampant borrowing and buying on credit without substantial collateral.³ Over 9000 banks closed between 1930 and 1933, with the loss of a third of the nation's money supply. Working class families were hit the worst when millions went to the banks to demand their life savings, only to find that the banks couldn't pay them, and in the blink of an eye countless people found themselves penniless.⁴

The reduction of the nation's money supply due to bank closures also caused severe deflation. Factories and stores began to lower prices and lay off workers to stay in business. This resulted in massive unemployment. By 1932 the U. S. unemployment rate reached 25 percent, with as many as a third more underemployed. Unemployment climbed higher in some cities, like Cleveland and Toledo, with unemployment of 50 and 80 percent respectively.⁵

The Upper Peninsula did not feel the full brunt of the Depression until about 1932, when demand for iron and copper dropped dramatically due to harsh tariff laws, such as the Smoot-Hawley Act, opposed by President Herbert Hoover (and many others, including Henry Ford) but signed into law in 1930. In 1929 the price of copper was 18 cents per pound; by 1932 it had dropped to 5.6 cents per pound. This drop in prices caused the copper industry in the U. P. to virtually grind to a halt, and of the six copper mines operating in 1929, only two remained in 1932, leaving over 6,000 miners unemployed.⁶ By 1934 fully 45 percent of the U. P. populace was on some form of economic relief.⁷ Although iron mining on the Marquette Range fared better than the copper mines in Houghton and the rest of the Copper Country, it still came to a near standstill. During the darkest years of the Depression,

1932-33, total ore production dropped from 4.5 million tons in 1930 to a low of 474,000 tons in 1932.⁸

The plight of the working class in the U. P. and the nation was exacerbated by the lack of dedicated relief and welfare programs. Although there were several state, local and private relief organizations, the sheer scope of the crisis swamped them, leaving millions to fend for themselves.

The lack of a social safety net stemmed from the governing philosophy of the ruling party as well as the populace in general during the decade leading up to the Depression. U. S. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon summarized the Republican view on welfare: "Taxation should not be used as a field for socialist experiment, or as a club to punish success." As a result, the nation's richest saw their taxes cut by almost two thirds during the 1920s. At the time, people generally agreed with Mellon's attitude, as rugged individualism and personal accountability had always been a hallmark of the American way of life.

In 1928, Calvin Coolidge decided not to run for a second term. In his place stepped his Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover. Hoover won the election in a landslide, beating New York Governor Al Smith 444 to 87 in the Electoral College.⁹ In Marquette County, Smith managed to win only three of forty-five precincts, with a popular vote of 4,343 compared to Hoover's 13,529.¹⁰ Upon entering office, Hoover was seen as a miracle worker for his post-war relief efforts in Europe.

Unfortunately for Hoover, the prosperity bubble of the Roaring Twenties burst less than a year after he took office. At the beginning of the Great Depression, Hoover tried to reassure an increasingly frightened population that "Prosperity is just around

the corner.” While Hoover did enact some legislation to combat the crisis, most was either poorly conceived or under-funded. Hoover signed into law the Smoot-Hawley Act in 1930, which quadrupled previous tariffs to protect American products from foreign competition. But the effect of the law was counter-productive, causing other countries to raise their own tariffs and drastically reduce global trade, thus creating lower demand for products.

This hit the Upper Peninsula's iron ore and copper mining industry hard, causing an even lower demand for copper and ore, thus increasing unemployment in the area.

The other major issue concerning voters in the 1932 election was Prohibition. The 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, ratified on January 16, 1919, set a beginning date of January 17, 1920, for the prohibition of the sale of “intoxicating liquors” in the U. S. The separate Volstead Act established enforcement procedures. Almost immediately after Prohibition took effect, a gigantic black market formed to provide people with the alcohol they wanted.

Michigan's long unguarded border with Canada allowed liquor to pour in through Detroit, Port Huron and the Upper Peninsula and thence into the entire Midwest. Thus bootlegging became, with logging and mining, one of the most lucrative businesses in the U. P.

The Red Dust Project, a catalog of hundreds of interviews with U. P. residents during the Depression, reveals just how common it was. Charles Bannon (b. 1920), a resident of National Mine, used to sell old whiskey bottles back to the moonshiners for theater money.¹¹ George August (b. 1915) said almost everyone he knew was either

bootlegging or drinking moonshine.¹² Charles Stakel, a former mining superintendent, has the most telling account of the widespread disregard for Prohibition. Before Prohibition was repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment, Stakel was in charge of the YMCA in Marquette County and always got funding because a town marshal named Jack Lacey would go to a supposedly closed tavern selling alcohol illegally (a so-called “blind pig”) and shake down the owners for \$1,000 every year and give the money to the YMCA.¹³

Conditions in Marquette County and the rest of the U. P. during the Depression were dire. The mines during this time were only operating at about an eighth capacity, causing widespread unemployment. According to the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company (CCI) report for 1933, “Our mines worked on a two day per week basis until April 8th when they were closed and reopened on November 8th on a three day per week schedule.”¹⁴ According to Charles Stakel, the mines from 1932 until 1934 were closed all year around except for the winter, because of the incredibly low demand for ore.¹⁵

However, despite the severe underemployment of the workers and the rough financial shape of the mines, there is no evidence of workers being forced out of their company homes at this time. This policy by the mining companies averted the shantytown problems of other places around the country. Also, during the worst years (1932-1934) of the Depression in Marquette, CCI pushed a strong campaign for residents to grow gardens for food and to limit credit debt to grocery stores. CCI also organized working parties to provide free fertilizer and till the land for residents unable to do so. Citizens were also encouraged to cut their own wood for heat and cooking, but by the end of 1933

all available wood in Negaunee and Ishpeming had been cut.¹⁶

During this time, CCI was obsessed with keeping costs at a minimum, especially taxes and employee compensation. The former led to a bitter dispute between the company and the Negaunee city government over the size of the city budget. From 1933 to 1936, CCI was constantly trying to get the city to lower its budget.¹⁷ According to Charles Stakel's memoir, the dispute was not only over the taxes paid by the company, but also over schools in the county not getting funding because of errors in land valuations.¹⁸ On several occasions the company threatened to get all the property in the county revalued to make the citizens pay more and thus reduce the tax burden on the company.¹⁹ With higher taxes on citizens, CCI further hoped the people would vote out the current city officials and install people presumably friendlier to the company.

Employee compensation was another topic that came up frequently in the CCI reports. Apparently to avoid any injuries or deaths on job sites, all employees were given thorough health examinations to determine if they were fit for mine work. When workers were found unfit, they were reassigned "in cases where it was mutually beneficial to do so."²⁰

With the Depression and Prohibition the top issues of the day, the stage was set for a bitter presidential campaign in 1932. An embattled Hoover faced off against former New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The body of the Republican Party platform in 1932 was to uphold the tariff laws, continue to uphold Prohibition, and withhold payment of the Veterans Bonus until 1944, as originally planned. These stands were not exactly popular with the

working class, with disastrous results for the Party. The Democratic platform was essentially the opposite: changes in tariff laws, immediate payment of the Veterans Bonus, and an old age and unemployment insurance plan.

Before the 1932 election, Michigan had always been a loyal Republican state. This was in no small part because the party was founded in Jackson, Michigan in 1854. Although the state had elected a few Democratic governors in the past, no Democratic presidential candidate had ever won Michigan's electoral votes. Considering Michigan's past voting record, it is no wonder that the GOP State Committee Chairman Howard C. Lawrence predicted that Hoover would carry the state by over 216,000 votes. He only predicted an even break for Democrats in seven counties, including the most populous, Wayne County, which included Detroit. Republicans also anticipated a 20,400 vote lead in the Upper Peninsula. The Democrats, on the other hand, could sense a shift in popular sentiment and predicted they would take Wayne County by 150,000 votes, and so take the state; but they did not dispute the predicted GOP majority in the U. P.²¹

Aside from the fact that Michigan was the GOP birthplace, there were also geographic reasons for Michigan's loyalty to the Republicans. Since the Civil War, Democrats had been associated with the Southern and more rural voters, while Republicans were usually northern, urban or dependent on single industries such as mining and manufacturing. This trend can be seen in Marquette County's voting record in 1932, where the larger towns were predominantly Republican while the smaller outlying townships were Democratic.

The 1932 vote was the largest in the nation's history up to that time, with anticipated vote of 40

million, which would have exceeded the 1928 election turnout by over three million votes. Marquette County printed 21,900 ballots, up almost 4,000 from 1928.²² Several major ballot initiatives also faced Marquette County voters in 1932. One was a proposal to build a new highway, known as US-41, to Marquette from the south. There were also two constitutional amendments to the tax code. The first dictated that citizens could be taxed \$15 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation; the second involved exempting \$1,000 of personal property and \$3,000 on homestead valuations.²³ Most importantly, there was also the “Red, White and Blue Amendment” for the repeal of Prohibition.

Outside the Upper Peninsula, the election was a landslide for the Democrats. Roosevelt trounced Hoover in the Electoral College by 472 to 89 votes, and by over seven million in the popular vote.²⁴ The Republican losses in Congress were equally damaging: 101 seats in the House and 12 seats in the Senate.²⁵ In Michigan, for the first time since the Republican Party was founded, the voters selected a Democratic candidate for President in FDR by over 120,000 votes. In addition, Michigan also elected Democratic candidate William Comstock for Governor, defeating Wilber Brucker by 156,000 votes.²⁶ Also, the most important board in the state, the State Administrative Board (made up of the Governor, Attorney General, Auditor General, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Highway Commissioner and Superintendent of Education) went Democratic for the first time in state history, by a majority of four to three. And this majority was not six to one only because the Highway Commissioner and the Superintendent were not up for election, thus saving them from the purge.²⁷ In fact, the only saving grace for Republicans was

Frank D. Fitzgerald, a rising star in the party and Secretary of State since 1930. Fitzgerald ran for reelection against challenger Burnett J. Abbott and became the sole state Republican up for reelection who returned to office. In a very close race, Fitzgerald won with the help of Upper Peninsula voters, who voted for him overwhelmingly.

Like the rest of the country, the U. P. shattered all previous voting records, with over 17,000 voting for President and 20,000 voting for lower offices. In the city of Marquette, the turnout was remarkable by any standards. Only 578 people didn't vote out of 6,408 eligible and most other cities and townships in Marquette County had turnouts at or above 75 percent.²⁸ However, the Democratic fever that gripped the rest of the nation did not fully penetrate the U. P.'s past loyalty to the GOP. A slight majority of 8 of 15 U. P. counties went for FDR, with Hoover winning the rest, including Marquette County by 9810 to 7221, or almost 2,600 votes. Hoover lost Marquette by 278 votes, while the heavily Republican towns of Negaunee and Ishpeming gave Hoover the nod by 1600 and 780 votes respectively. Townships also divided along similar lines, with the smaller ones like Chocolay, Wells and Powell going Democrat, and the larger ones like Richmond and Republic going to the Republicans.²⁹ Although there were several Democratic strongholds in the county, the county as a whole, with the help of Ishpeming and Negaunee, stayed almost exclusively Republican. In fact, no state Democratic candidate was even close to winning in the county. For example, candidate for Governor Wilber Brucker beat out William Comstock by 2400 votes, only to lose in the larger state-wide vote. Incumbent Lieutenant Governor Luren D. Dickinson also won Marquette County by over 2,000 votes, only to be

defeated in the rest of the state by Allen Stebbins, the Democratic challenger. County voters also elected Frank Fitzgerald, the star of the state Republicans, by an almost two to one margin over Burnett Abbott.³⁰ This same voting pattern continued for Republican candidates for Attorney General, State Treasurer and Auditor General. All were elected by at least 2,000 votes in the county only to be defeated in the state-wide election by a vengeful lower Michigan electorate.

For 12th District Representative, long time Republican incumbent W. Frank James of Hancock defeated challenger Levi Rice of Bessemer by a vote of 11,090 to 5,245.³¹ James was finally defeated by Frank Hook of L'Anse in 1934, after almost 20 years in office.

In the local elections, only two of eleven Democrats were elected to office: Theodore A. Thoren was elected to Circuit Court Commissioner and John Siegel won as County Coroner. Both Democrats won by very close margins, less than 250 votes of over 20,000 votes cast.³² One milestone for the 1932 local election was the election of Republican Ellen M. Sandell to the post of Register of Deeds; she became the first woman ever elected to office in Marquette County.³³ On the amendment vote, the "Red, White and Blue Amendment" to end Prohibition overwhelmingly passed in the county with 10,414 voting Yes and 5,053 voting against. In the state the amendment passed by an almost three to one margin: 654,639 Yes, and 251,191 against. Prohibition was ending in Michigan and the U. S. Locally the initiative to build Highway 41 to connect to Lake Street passed as well.³⁴

After FDR took office in March of 1933, he immediately enacted a flurry of reforms known as

the New Deal to help ease the Depression and those included the two federal programs most important to the Upper Peninsula: The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These two were vital to the area because with the logging and mining industries seriously hindered by the Depression, thousands of men, young and old, were out of work and desperately needed an income. Although during the previous years, unemployed workers were able to make a little money by taking part in the firewood cutting campaigns or other CCC welfare efforts, there was no substantial employment except during the winter months when the mines opened. With the new programs, older men were put to work in various WPA projects throughout the county, including the building of US-41 and other roads, for 25 cents an hour. Teenagers and men in their early twenties were employed by CCC planting trees outside communities, building parks and other conservation projects—all of which kept them out of trouble and helped contribute to the relative calm that the county enjoyed throughout the period. CCC members were housed in barracks-style camps outside major U. P. towns. The CCC camp closest to Marquette, known as Camp Escanaba, was located eight miles south of Gwinn near the Escanaba River. By 1936, Marquette County had four camps: Escanaba and Little Lake near Gwinn, Big Bay, and Dukes.³⁵

Also relevant to the Upper Peninsula was the Emergency Banking Act, which closed all banks in the U. S. for four days so bankers could close insolvent banks and reorganize and reopen those banks that were strong enough to survive. This act had a significant effect on Ishpeming and Negaunee. Two Negaunee banks, Negaunee

National and Negaunee State, were closed in 1933. Luckily Negaunee First National took over the former Negaunee National and prevented it from failing.³⁶ However, both of Ishpeming's banks failed to reopen after the banking holiday, leaving many individuals without money to survive and no way to earn it.

The positive effect of FDR's policies on Marquette County caused a major shift in the political loyalties of the residents. Although the voting records show a strong Republican majority in the county before FDR was elected, testimonials of residents years later show that the shift to a Democratic majority was mainly the product of the CCC and the WPA. The vast majority of people show a great affection for FDR, with a proportionate scorn for Hoover. Clarence Emanuelson (born 1905) said that the New Deal made life a little better in the county, while he criticized Hoover as a man who "...didn't do anything and thought a working man could live on eight soda crackers a day."³⁷ William Goldsworthy believed that Hoover was the direct cause of the Depression, while FDR was praised for the WPA and CCC. Bill Peterson also praised FDR and the New Deal, stating that it put a lot of poor people back to work.³⁸ Whether the criticisms of Hoover were accurate or not, these opinions of area residents indicate a dramatic change of attitude toward the Democrats via FDR's actions, with remarkable results in the 1936 election.

By 1936, FDR was a larger than life national force, and the Republican Party was still in disarray. Republicans chose "Alf" Landon, a Kansas governor, as their Presidential nominee.

The Presidential election of 1936 was a predictable landslide, with Landon only winning two states, Maine and Vermont, for a total of eight electoral votes to FDR's 523.³⁹ In fact, this was the

nearest the country had come to a totally unanimous vote since James Monroe was reelected in 1820 with only a single electoral vote against him.⁴⁰ This devastating loss prompted a prominent Democratic Party boss to famously joke "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont."⁴¹ Republicans lost in the Senate and House as well.

Landon was so unpopular that in Michigan, Republican gubernatorial candidate Frank Fitzgerald's name appeared at the top of the ticket and Landon's at the bottom.

The Upper Peninsula results were exactly the opposite the 1932 election. FDR won Marquette County by 4,400 votes, with only 7,600 votes going to Landon, and 12,000 going to FDR. The U. P. overall gave FDR a 26,000 vote majority, again almost exactly opposite the 1932 numbers; and FDR won in all U. P. counties but one, Keweenaw.⁴²

Marquette voters were even more partisan in their state and local voting. Not one state Republican candidate was elected in the county, and James T. Hodge won the County Coroner position by less than 200 votes, making him the only Republican to win in Marquette County in 1936.⁴³ Even Frank Fitzgerald, who carried the county easily in 1932, lost to Frank Murphy in the county vote for governor by over 2,000 votes, and in the state Fitzgerald lost by 50,000 votes. With the defeat of Fitzgerald, Michigan was left with the first all Democratic rule in its history.⁴⁴ For 12th District Representative, Democrat Frank Hook tripled his winning margin from the 1934 election, again defeating former Representative W. Frank James, and piling up leads in all but two 12th District counties.

In local elections, Ellen Sandell, the first woman elected to office in Marquette, lost her bid for reelection as Register of Deeds by only 150 votes to

Axel Senobe. There were other firsts in the county: Michael J. Khoury and Lloyd Levasseur became the first Democrats in county history to take over the posts of Judge of Probate and County Clerk.⁴⁵ Several longstanding Republicans were swept away by the Democratic tide, including William Prin, who had served as County Coroner for 32 years, as well as William Richards, who had served as Inspector of Mines for three consecutive terms. Another astonishing development was the shift in the former Republican stronghold of Negaunee, which became the only city in the county to go straight-ticket Democrat in all five precincts, while in Ishpeming, the other Republican stronghold, only three of the ten precincts went Republican.⁴⁶

Despite Landon's unpopularity, the outcome of the election was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Some public polls, most notably a *Readers Digest* poll, had predicted that Landon would actually defeat Roosevelt, and both sides considered Michigan a battleground state. Before the election, GOP strategists asserted that their humiliating Presidential loss in 1932 was an accident and that Michigan's longstanding Republican tradition would be upheld in 1936, while Democrats asserted that Wayne County's strong Democratic majority would push them to victory as it had in 1932.

Voter turnout in 1936 exceeded even the record breaking election four years earlier, with Marquette County expecting a record 6,000 votes and Ishpeming and Negaunee also breaking previous records. This high voter turnout occurred throughout the country, obviously indicating that the effects of the Depression, despite New Deal programs, were still deeply affecting the voters and thus energizing turnout.

In conclusion, the national election result of 1932 was a product of social and economic factors that were not present in the Upper Peninsula until after that election. Although Prohibition was deeply unpopular in the region and a factor in the Republican defeat nationally, that alone was not enough to push voters out of the Republican camp. It would take the collapse of the mining industry caused by the Depression in the years following the 1932 election, as well as FDR's welfare programs—especially the CCC and WPA—in the subsequent years of unemployment to finally push Upper Peninsula voters to turn out the Republicans wholeheartedly in 1936.

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